Analysing The Political Mystery: The Notion of Secularised Minority In India

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The conflict between religious faith and human reason sets the background for the emergence of the modern ideology of "secularism", textured in the late middle ages. Eventually, in the 17th century, the encounters between religious faith and human reason led to the establishment of what is called modernity. Though distinctions among communities have obviously existed throughout history, nonetheless, in the political debates, the concepts of "minority" and "majority" are relatively recent. Some political systems did grant special community rights to their minorities, although this was not generally based on any recognition of minority "rights". In India, a coalition of the oppressed castes, classes and gender across religions can overcome communalism and attain democracy. That is a long struggle for secularisation to thrive along with the resistance to the majoritarian discourse to equate majority and minority communalism.

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On the encounter of religion and science, Alfred North Whitehead wrote in *The Atlantic* monthly in 1925, that "religion will not regain its old power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science" (Whitehead, 1925), globally that statement is still standing high. India has lessons to learn from European experiences of religion, science and politics. The German sociologist Max Weber proposed that religious changes took place first and therefore the social changes. Weber wrote that the Protestant Reformation unleashed massive productivity and economic improvement in Europe because of the "Protestant work ethic". The history of science presents that even in the ancient world, scientific learning moved long distances, breaching cultural and religious barriers. By the 17th and 18th centuries, the internationalist character of science came to be explicitly recognised. Independence of science from the imposition of religious dogma, both in matters of scientific fact and interpretation, was tougher and more challenging. No religious state can excel in scientific inventions and democracy; the lessons from past experiences prove this. The conflict between religious faith and human reason forms part of the background to the emergence of the modern ideology of "secularism", textured in the late Middle Ages. Eventually, the encounters between religious faith and human reason led in the 17th century led to the establishment of modernity. This consisted of a serious attempt to construct a rational explanation of the universe on the basis of scientific or experimental knowledge, and control it through technology (Madan, 2011). The process of secularisation encompassed everything including politics,

arts, history, morals and science. Simultaneously, in the age of reason and religion, the process of secularisation became involved in a 'subtle shift of attention': religious institutions and religious explanations of events were slowly displaced from the centre of life to the periphery (Gay, 1966). In order to sustain a democratic system, it is essential to preserve scientific knowledge and secularism.

Democracy and Representation of Minorities

Though distinctions among communities have obviously existed throughout history, in the political debates, the concepts of "minority" and "majority" are relatively recent. Some political systems did grant special community rights to their minorities, although this was not generally based on any recognition of minority "rights" as such. For example, the *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire, allowed a degree of cultural and religious autonomy to non-Muslim religious communities, such as Orthodox Christians, Armenians, Jews and others. In the late 18th century, the French and American revolutions proclaimed the free exercise of religion as a fundamental right, although neither directly addressed the broader issue of minority protection. The 1815 Congress of Vienna, which dismantled the Napoleonic Empire, recognised minority rights to some extent, as did the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, which recognised special rights for the religious community of Mount Athos (Promoting and Protecting Minority Rights, 2012).

Democracy faced its most serious crisis in decades in 2017 as its basic tenets-including guarantees of free and fair elections, the rights of minorities, freedom of the press, and the rule of law etc. came under attack around the world. Seventy-one countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties, with only 35 registering gains. This marked the 12th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. The United States retreated from its traditional role as both a champion and an exemplar of democracy amid an accelerating decline in American political rights and civil liberties. Over the period since the 12-year global slide began in 2006, 113 countries have seen a net decline, and only 62 have experienced a net improvement (Abramowitz, 2018).

De-secularising mode: The Case of India

The foundation of political secularism lies in the separation of religion and state. The separation ensures that religious groups do not interfere in the affairs of the state, and the state should not interfere in the affairs of religious groups. According to the Constitution of India, the right to freedom of religion is guaranteed to all Indians under Articles 25 to 28. According to Jaffrelot (2019), the Hindu nationalists who later came to populate the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its various ideological affiliates have consistently harboured a starkly different view; they envision India as a majoritarian nation-state. The tensions inherent in these competing visions of Indian nationhood have come to the fore in recent years, particularly since NDA's remarkable electoral victory in 2014. B.R Ambedkar had supposed already that Political democracy could not last unless social democracy survived at its base. Social democracy could be considered as a way of life which acknowledged liberty, equality and fraternity as doctrines of life. Ambedkar sensed that India's political democracy would be in menace if India were unrelenting to repudiate equality in the social and economic life of its citizens (Ambedkar, 1979).

The politics from 1989 to 2009 has had serious long-term implications for the secularisation process and for the nature of Indian democracy. The results of the 2009 national elections raised expectations about de-communalisation of national politics because it stemmed from the belief that the second successive defeat of the Hindutva party would compel it to reconsider its exclusivist politics of majoritarian tantalisation (Sheth, 2019). However, the tantalisation politics in the past few years has led to the exteriorisation of almost all issues and problems facing a principal religious community in the present scenario. Over a period of time Indian democracy, however, seems to have cherished institutions - such as the Election Commission, the Central Vigilance Commission, the Central Information Commission and the Comptroller and Auditor General, with the courts keeping a close eye on constitutional infringements on the part of the legislature or the executive. The common man's trust in and respect for the four pillars of democracy have taken a grim scourging over the past several years. (Sivaramakrishnan & Padmanabhan, 2020).

Consolidation or Communalism: Good of X, Bad of Y?

India is known traditionally as a land of religions and a land of religious orthodoxy. Nevertheless, religious hostility in India has not directly succeeded in state rivalries in the way that it did in Europe, especially after the bloody religious wars of the 16th century. The colonial past in India created the interest in vernacular education that has focused on religious and social reform to some extent. In post-independent India, the public media, the secular politicians and the political observers generally reach the conclusion that Hindus (80%) are the majority and Muslims (15%) are the minority. In post-independent India, there is a prevailing discourse that unless there is equivalence in treating majority communalism and minority communalism, the principle of secularism is merely pseudo-secularism. The formation of this discourse for equivalence is treacherous at the present time since that overlooks some essential dissimilarities between the two types of communalism. First, it equalises who cannot be equalised, for equality is not the equal treatment of unequal entities. Secondly, it participates in the increasing amalgamation of Hindu communalism with nationalism (Mannathukkaran, 2016). A similar concern is shared by Madan (2011), "Should not non-discrimination between different religious communities be one of the first principles of a secular state?" According to Madan, "the answer lies largely in the fact that, as observed earlier, non-discrimination may not be sufficient to meet the requirements of the situation. The anxieties and sensitivities of the minorities must be recognised" as India is an aspiring democracy. According to V.V John, the leaders of the minority community practice 'selective secularism' and demand from Hindus what they do not themselves practice (Madan, 2011). One creative argument in this regard is that minority communalism is a halfway house to secularism (Baig, 1967).

It is a prodigious myth that Indian Muslims are a homogeneous sect. The discourse has been created that the consolidation of Muslims into a single political unit or their political mobilisation will easily lead again in India to the concept of two nations that could be ended up in another communal conflict and bloodshed. Minority's political consolidation will fuel the massive consolidation of the Hindu majority that also threatens the secular and democratic fabric of the nation, is the second hypothesis frequently proposed even by some secular politicians in India.

This trend has also been there in Kerala, where the social condition of minorities is quite better than in other parts of India. From the times of the partition of India onwards such concern is unnecessarily hyped by the spokesmen of political enmity as part of political vendetta. While Jawarharlal Nehru's words are lawful and unfluctuating now: "both Hindu and Muslim Communalism are bad. But Muslim communalism cannot be dominate Indian society and introduce fascism. That only Hindu communalism can" (Nehru, 1985).

The majoritarian discourse, on the one hand, is based on the premise that the majority religious community can commit any act of mass violence, nonetheless, that will not be considered anti-national. On the other hand, minority violence is essentially considered anti-national. This discourse, in post-independent India, has clearly manifested in response to several riots. The majority communalism is deadliest when it becomes the official ideology of any of the states in the world. The discourse – minority communalism can never be compared with majority communalism, for the former is ghettoised and mainly feeds upon its own people, for example, the conservative Ulemas and Shah Bano case of 1986. The minority community claims to represent while the majority succeeds by feeding off the society at large, including the minorities. Having the enormous power that being 80 per cent of the population of a state brings, majority communalism is infinitely more consequential for it determines the socio-political discourse, leaving minority communalism to defend itself and ghettoise further (Mannathukkaran, 2016). Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation CPI (ML) General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya in an interview with *Outlook* in November 2020, said about the presence of Asaduddin Owaisi's political presence in Bihar, "The AIMIM (All India Ithihade Majlise Musliminn) has every right to contest the election and it managed to win five seats. One has to see the reason why people are gravitating towards AIMIM. There is a sensitivity that many conventional political parties are soundless about the witch hunt and attacks on Muslims and minority communities in India. These parties have to be more vocal about issues in terms of identity, existence, and minority rights. We cannot blame the minorities moving towards AMIM or them contesting elections in Bihar" (Nair, 2020). There is a significant point to debate within it. The discourse always highlights that the Muslim minorities should associate with the secular parties, instead of their own identity centred politics. There is a significant question for the minority community how long secular parties of India can stay secular and trusted. It is ambiguous that secular legislative members would ally with BJP in the post-electoral politics as it happened in Karnataka, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh, is a matter for minorities to end their votes in secular political parties in the present scenario. One more question is imperative in this debate, and it would be superfluous, will Muslims be socially secure if they are socially and politically modern and secular. The very fact of the Muslim politics laying behind in Bhattacharya's words is their political dependency. To whom Muslim votes should depend, even at the time of questioning of their citizenship by the nationally is a critical question.

In the recent past, which secular parties are consistent and dependable to protect the civil and political rights of Muslim minorities is a critical question discussed among them. For nearly seven decades they voted for INC, NCP, SP, BSP, and RJD in independent India. In Kerala, Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) is effervescent in electoral politics and manages to secure substantial seats in the state legislature,

like Kerala Congress - a party largely surviving in the Christian majority area of Kerala. Since independence initially political apartheid from INC but IUML has had alliances with left parties earlier and with INC later in Kerala. The AIMIM fielded 20 candidates for 243 seat assembly in the 2020 Bihar elections, of which 14 were in the Muslim dominated Seemanchal region. It is substantial to note that AIMIM secured 5 seats, but that could not make a big dent in Mahagathbandhan's vote share. AIMIM is yet again ambitious in future elections, raising concerns about secular politics and that is a political dilemma.

Secular Answer

The political mobilisation on the basis of religious identity is not pertinent to the assumptions of liberal democracy. Political scientist Rajiv Bhargava observes that "The durability of the Indian nation-state depends on the dissolution of the majority-minority syndrome... The syndrome can be cured only when large sections of Hindus begin to really value the idea of equal citizenship, to uncouple equality from sameness; and when Muslim leaders and their blind followers, having fatefully embraced conservative communitarianism, adopt a less instrumentalist attitude to liberal and democratic institutions (Bhargava, 2002).In India institutions alone cannot sustain constitutional secularism, however, it is indispensable to develop a collective effort from a free and independent judiciary, media and civil society to its enhancement. Political mobility has become the last resort for the minorities evolved from their feeling of social insecurity and alienation over the last several decades. The offenders behind a particular section of the community being mobilised in the name of their communal/religious identity are mainstream political parties and whether they are secular or non-secular never matters. Socio-political estrangement is the principal reason in the wake of identity politics. Historically, a secular state is the contribution of dissemination of profane values by the national regime. Minorities possess constitutional rights to be part of the electoral politics, nevertheless, this has always been constantly attacked by communal parties, however in India, other political parties have been too not committed to irreligious political means. Several scholars of secularism, namely Rajiv Bhargava, hold the same position. All the Muslim political parties are severely criticised for being communal; they may have the orthodox lives but that could be only reformed by secular democratic politics (Bhargava, 2002). It is apparent that a minority community themselves cannot be secular/modern in a political system while the majority is religiously orthodox in nature. In India, the political culture of the nation has been of the majority, as Thomas Jefferson's celebrated phrase, 'the will of the majority' is the 'natural law of every society' (Cunningham Jr., 1991). The political culture of a nation is the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments of the majority which give order and meaning to the political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour in the political system. Also, it encompasses both the political ideals and the operating norms of a majority.

Conclusion

In India, a coalition of the oppressed castes, classes and gender across religions can overcome communalism and attain democracy. That is a long struggle for secularisation has to thrive along with the resistance to the majoritarian discourse to equate majority and minority communalism. The menace and sequence of

communal abhorrence and violence can be clogged only by stopping first the discourse of fictitious equivalences and selective silences. The major political parties must be secularised initially which would be the prototypical of minor parties/ minorities in the process of secularisation, democratisation and therefore modernisation of the state. The secularisation process of the majority could lead to the nascent secularisation of orthodox lives of Muslim minorities is unequivocal. It could be observed that the cultural-anthropological lives of Muslims in Kerala are heterogeneous from the rest of the Muslims in India. The viable policies of secularisation process are obliged to be implemented at the broad spectrum of the majority community, not at the minorities, since the secularisation would be mounting from the top/state of it certainly be reached at the bottom – on minorities, that is a natural process. In such a way, to demystify the minority, the modernisation of a nation becomes a doable end process.

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